

CHAPTER IV

RELIGION

THE SOCIAL POSITION AND BIPOLAR. INFLUENCE OF
THE CHURCH IN ENGLAND. WYCLIFFS'S
ATTACK

IT is impossible to write a history of any mediæval period without dealing at considerable length with ecclesiastical affairs. The State in modern times covers much more of the nation's history than once it did. In the Middle Ages the Church administered whole sides of life which have since been put into the hands of the secular government, or left to the discretion of the individual. Every Englishman has now to subject himself to the laws of the State on certain matters; in everything else he is his own master, unless he chooses also to bind himself voluntarily by the regulations of other societies. In the Middle Ages he was not only subjected to the laws of the State in its sphere, but to the laws of the Church in her sphere. He became as much an outlaw by disobedience to the one as by disobedience to the other. Until the latter part of the fourteenth century, this division of the national life had caused but little difficulty in England. In questions of marriage and testamentary succession, in the punishment of sins not cognisable by the law of the land, the Church had enforced standards of morality consonant with the ideas of the time, with such strictness or laxity as was acceptable to the conscience of the nation. Neither in intellectual matters had any one seriously questioned her teaching. Heresy was practically unknown in our island* But in the later years of the fourteenth century two movements came to the front, both tending in the same direction* One attack is directed against the temporal and political